PROFILES

By

Content

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One Sunday afternoon in September, 2020, Jay Bhattacharya, an epidemiologist at Stanford University, was at home in Los Altos when he got an unexpected call. It was Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, and he wanted to talk about the coronavirus. In the early months of the pandemic, Bhattacharya had established himself as an outlier among public-health experts. He is one of three scientists who drafted the Great Barrington Declaration, which argued that many governments were doing more harm than good by shutting down economies and schools. The only practical approach, they said, would be to protect the most vulnerable—mainly by isolating the elderly—and allow everyone else to go about their lives until vaccines and herd immunity neutralized the disease. With COVID-19 killing hundreds of Americans every day, the signers of the declaration became pariahs in their profession. “I’ve lost friends,” Bhattacharya told me. “I’m lucky to have tenure.”

DeSantis, young and aggressively confident, was similarly convinced that he could find a better way to handle the virus. Talking with him, Bhattacharya was surprised by his command of the research. “He’d read all the medical literature—all of it, not just the abstracts,” he told me. The science, though, remained unclear—Did the virus linger on surfaces? Did it travel in droplets or in a fog?—and many politicians found that the most appealing solutions were the ones that fit their ideology. For DeSantis, who espouses a libertarian vision of small government and personal freedom, the ideas in the Great Barrington Declaration resonated. In his view, the government, apart from protecting the elderly and making treatments available, should do almost nothing.

Initially, as the virus began spreading in Florida, DeSantis had ordered a statewide lockdown, in accordance with Dr. Anthony Fauci’s recommendations. Three weeks later, he changed his mind. “We will never do any of these lockdowns again,” he said. After talking to Bhattacharya, he lifted nearly all remaining restrictions—on schools, government buildings, stores, restaurants, and other private businesses—and halted the enforcement of mask mandates.

More on Ron DeSantis

Dexter Filkins discusses the Florida governor on The New Yorker Radio Hour.

As the death toll mounted, he was mocked by critics as “DeathSantis” and denounced by the mainstream press. “Any public distrust of this administration has been well-earned,” the Miami *Herald* editorial board wrote. “We can’t trust the governor with our lives.” A former political adviser with knowledge of the COVID response told me that DeSantis was unfazed: “We were getting crucified, but to him it was just noise.” DeSantis revels in defying what he sees as a corrupt and self-satisfied liberal establishment. Those who work closely with him say that he is unique among elected officials in his disregard for public opinion and the press. “Ron’s strength as a politician is that he doesn’t give a fuck,” a Republican consultant who knows him told me. “Ron’s weakness as a politician is that he doesn’t give a fuck. Big donors? He doesn’t give a shit. Cancels on them all the time.”

DeSantis’s approach to the pandemic gave rise to an entire governing strategy, in which he regularly denounced some outrage, invariably perpetrated by the left, and proclaimed that he was the only one brave enough to stop it. He laced his speeches and press conferences with anger; when he walked, he thrust out his chest like a soldier on parade. He became a regular on Fox News, second only to Donald Trump as a figure of admiration. His aggressive defense of minimal state action, and his denunciations of anyone who disagreed with him, made him a conservative folk hero.

DeSantis faces reëlection later this year, but his ascent has been so dramatic that in a few polls he comes out ahead of Trump in the race for the Republican Presidential nomination; without Trump, he commands a big lead. Both men claim to channel the rage of an electorate that feels sneered at and dismissed by liberal institutions. But while Trump, with his lazy, Barnumesque persona, projects a fundamental lack of seriousness, DeSantis has an intense work ethic, a formidable intelligence, and a granular understanding of policy. Articulate and fast on his feet, he has been described as Trump with a brain.

In February, DeSantis appeared at the Conservative Political Action Conference, held at the Rosen Shingle Creek Hotel, a sprawling resort near Orlando. The convention halls were filled with the Party’s new vanguard, which was, on the whole, poorer and angrier than the bankers and golfers who led the G.O.P. a generation ago. The panels ranged from outraged to vengeful. A health-care panel was called “Obamacare Still Kills.” A discussion of COVID-19 policy was titled “Lock Downs and Mandates: Now Do You Understand Why We Have a Second Amendment.”

From the main stage, DeSantis flashed a smile and tossed baseball caps into the crowd. In a twenty-minute speech, he described an America under assault by left-wing élites, who “want to delegitimize our founding institutions.” His job as governor, he said, was to fight the horsemen of the left: critical race theory, “Faucian dystopia,” uncontrolled immigration, Big Tech, “left-wing oligarchs,” “Soros-funded prosecutors,” transgender athletes, and the “corporate media.” In Florida, he said, he had created a “citadel of freedom” that had become a beacon for people “chafing under authoritarian rule”; he cited disgruntled citizens of Australia, Canada, and Europe. (He didn’t mention the Russian invasion of Ukraine.) “We’re not letting Florida cities burn down,” DeSantis told the crowd. “In Florida, you’re not going to get a slap on the wrist. You are getting the inside of a jail cell.” He offered no new policies, though he did mention that he was requiring high-school seniors to pass a civics exam.

DeSantis is not a charismatic speaker, but he is dogged and precise, and the crowd was inflamed. Trump, the ostensible star of CPAC, was scheduled to speak later, but DeSantis didn’t mention him. (“Their relationship is complicated,” a lawyer close to DeSantis told me.) And, while DeSantis used Florida as a touchstone, he sounded as if he had all of America on his mind. “In times like these, there is no substitute for courage,” he said. “We need people all over the country to be willing to put on that full armor of God.” As the crowd burst into cheers, he vowed, “We have only begun to fight.”

From a remove—onstage at a conference, or pressing an argument on Fox News—DeSantis seems constructed for political success. He grew up in a working-class neighborhood, went to Yale and played on the baseball team, graduated from Harvard Law School, served in the military in Iraq. His family is ready made for a campaign brochure. “He’s good-looking,” John Morgan, a lawyer in Orlando who has worked with DeSantis, told me. “His wife is really good-looking. His family is beautiful. They look like they’re from central casting.”

In person, he often comes across differently. “Ron is at his best on paper,” a Florida political leader who knows DeSantis told me. “Then you meet him and you say, ‘Oh, my gosh.’ ” People who work closely with him describe a man so aloof that he sometimes finds it difficult to carry on a conversation. “He’s not comfortable engaging other people,” a political leader who sees him often told me. “He walks into the meeting and doesn’t acknowledge the rest of us. There’s no eye contact and little or no interaction. The moment I start to ask him a question, his head twitches. You can tell he doesn’t want to be there.” (DeSantis’s office declined requests for comment.)

Nearly everyone I talked to who knew DeSantis commented on his affect: his lack of curiosity about others, his indifferent table manners, his aversion to the political rituals of dispensing handshakes and questions about the kids. One former associate told me that his demeanor stems from a conviction that others have advantages that were denied to him. “The anger comes more easily to him because he has a chip on his shoulder,” she said. “He is a serious guy. Driven.”

In February, I drove to Dunedin, Florida, a city of thirty-six thousand near Tampa, where DeSantis spent most of his youth. His old neighborhood is typical of those built before the boom years began, in the nineteen-seventies; the houses are modest and close together, and the city, once dotted with open lots, is overrun by traffic. DeSantis’s street is quiet, though; many of the houses have screen doors and jalousie windows and sprinklers attached to garden hoses. American flags and Trump signs mark the lawns, including the one at the house where DeSantis’s parents still live.

When I knocked, the Governor’s father, also named Ron, came to the door. He was dressed in a Florida State University T-shirt and shorts, and there was a day’s stubble on his face. “I’d rather not talk to you,” he said. “You might be a good guy, but, if I tell you something, somebody—maybe not you—will twist it around.” Then he stepped outside and started to talk. The F.S.U. T-shirt, he said, came from his daughter, Christina, who earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees there. “When my daughter graduated from F.S.U., I thought it was the last time I’d ever have to make the drive to Tallahassee—two hundred and thirty-one miles,” he said. In fact, his wife, Karen, who is a retired nurse, was in Tallahassee that day to visit their son at the governor’s mansion; Ron, Sr., had stayed home alone.

DeSantis told me that he’d brought his family to Dunedin from Jacksonville, where Ron was born, in 1978. He had a job with Nielsen, the television-ratings company. For years, he traversed neighborhoods, asking people if they would agree to have a Nielsen box attached to their television. “It’s incredible how many people would just let me into their houses, even though they didn’t know me,” he said. “I’d be there until eight o’clock installing the thing.”

I asked what Ron was like growing up. “He was stubborn,” DeSantis said. “If he set his mind to something, you couldn’t shake him.” DeSantis pointed into the street, where he and his son used to play catch; there were ball fields nearby, where he had coached Ron’s Little League teams. “I tried not to favor him, and Ron didn’t like that,” he said. Early on, his son had read “The Science of Hitting,” by Ted Williams, the baseball great, who advised young hitters to take care in choosing pitches to swing at. “I must have thrown a half million pitches to Ron, and I think he swung at about five hundred of them,” he said. “I wish he would have never read it.” In 1991, when DeSantis was twelve, his team made it to the Little League World Series.

The young DeSantis attended Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School and then Dunedin High, where he was a star outfielder. He was focussed and motivated, his father said, adding, “He didn’t get that from me.” DeSantis scored in the ninety-ninth percentile on his SAT and was accepted to Yale, his father said: “It’s still the thing I’m most proud of.” But he didn’t like to make too much of it. “Everybody wants to brag about their kids, and people ask me about Ron. I try to be modest.”

At Yale, DeSantis majored in history and played on the baseball team, in the outfield. In the Yale tradition, the team never had a winning season while DeSantis was there. (“Pretty sure we were the worst team in Division One,” one of his teammates told me.) In his senior year, he was among the best hitters, batting .336, and was elected captain. His former teammates’ recollections are sharply divided, but nearly everyone I spoke with remembered him as singularly focussed, with little time for parties or goofing off; he worked several jobs to help pay his tuition. “Ron was a bit of a loner, not a social butterfly,” Dave Fortenbaugh, a former teammate, told me. “He spent a lot of hours in the library.”

Some recalled that DeSantis was so intensely focussed that he wasn’t much of a teammate. “Ron is the most selfish person I have ever interacted with,” another teammate told me. “He has always loved embarrassing and humiliating people. I’m speaking for others—he was the biggest dick we knew.” But the same teammate praised DeSantis’s intellect. “This is the frustrating part. He’s so fucking smart and so creative,” he said. “You couldn’t even plagiarize off his work. He’d take some angle, and everyone knew there was only one person who could have done that.”

After graduating, with honors, DeSantis taught history for a year at the Darlington School, a private institution in Rome, Georgia, before enrolling at Harvard Law School; a friend told me that he’d been inspired by the movie “A Few Good Men.” In the film, Tom Cruise plays a judge advocate general—a Navy attorney—who defends marines accused of a deadly assault at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Base. With the war in Iraq still raging, DeSantis, too, became a judge advocate general. He was posted to Naval Station Mayport, near Jacksonville, and also to Guantánamo, where he dealt with detainees. A colleague who served with DeSantis remembered, “Ron was a voracious worker, and he worked at phenomenal speed. He was a superb writer, especially for his age.” Even then, his ambition seemed consuming. “Ron’s a user,” the former colleague told me. “If you had utility to him, he would be nice to you. If you didn’t, he wouldn’t give you the time of day.”

In 2007, DeSantis deployed to Iraq as a lawyer for SEAL Team One, which was conducting operations in Ramadi. The SEALs have a reputation for being secretive and insular, but DeSantis enjoyed their company, his father told me: “He worked out with them.” DeSantis briefed the SEALs on rules of engagement—when they could shoot, how they should treat prisoners. “Of course we were worried about him,” his father said. “Ron told us he was just in one place, in Ramadi, but afterwards we found out that he’d been moving all around the area, from city to city, with the SEALs. It really upset my wife.”

Back in Florida, DeSantis started dating Casey Black, a television news reporter for WJXT, in Jacksonville; in 2010, they were married. Not long afterward, a seat opened up in the Sixth Congressional District, south of Jacksonville Beach. In 2012, DeSantis entered the race.

DeSantis campaigned on smaller government and lower taxes, arguing to overturn Obamacare and eliminate entire federal agencies. “My mission was largely to stop Barack Obama,” he told a crowd later. As the campaign got under way, DeSantis published a book titled “Dreams from Our Founding Fathers”—a swipe at the President’s memoir. For a campaign book, it’s unusually wide-ranging, with carefully argued sections on the Federalist Papers, the Progressive Era, and the leftist theoretician Saul Alinsky. The basic contention, though, would have been familiar to followers of Barry Goldwater: “The conceit that underlies many of Obama’s policies and his allies is that virtually any issue, from the waistline of children to the temperature of the earth, is ripe for intervention of expert (and progressive) central planners.” DeSantis’s book was largely ignored—he once told a crowd that it was “read by about a dozen people”—but his message resonated in the Sixth District, one of the most conservative in the state. He won the election, and was reëlected twice by wide margins.

In Congress, an institution where seniority matters, DeSantis had little time to make a substantive impact. Theatrically, though, he created an impression. He helped found the Freedom Caucus, an invitation-only club of hard-right conservatives, and he was among the Republicans who took the government to the brink of default by refusing to raise the national-debt ceiling. Many people worried that the move would harm the government’s credit rating and the country’s economy. Even John Boehner, the House Speaker, opposed it. In response, DeSantis joined a group of Republican congressmen who threatened to remove Boehner from his post. “There were governing conservatives and shutdown conservatives,” David Jolly, a congressman from Florida who served with DeSantis, told me. “Ron was a shutdown conservative.”

Many of DeSantis’s colleagues remember him as remote. A former member of the Florida delegation told me, “He always had his earbuds in, to keep people away.” Others, like Jolly, had a more temperate view. “He’s a little reclusive, a bit of an odd duck,” Jolly said, “but he’s just incredibly disciplined.”

DeSantis’s colleagues say that he was less interested in drafting legislation than in positioning himself for higher office. In his first term, he started courting leading conservative donors, including the Koch family and Sheldon Adelson, and money began to flow. “It’s not easy getting those meetings,” Jolly told me. “But Ron did it, and he convinced them that he was one of their friends.”

In 2018, two years after Trump carried Florida in the Presidential election, DeSantis declared his run for governor. His opponent in the primary was Adam Putnam, the state commissioner of agriculture. Putnam was the sort of Republican that Trump had swept away in the primaries: a staid, moderate product of the establishment.

DeSantis’s record in Congress had put him at the libertarian edge of his party; he earned one-hundred-per-cent ratings from the Heritage Foundation and Americans for Prosperity. He was ideologically consistent, even when it cost him. Twice, DeSantis voted to cut price supports for sugar, pitting himself against one of Florida’s most powerful interests, which receives tens of millions of dollars in state subsidies a year. The industry funded Putnam’s campaign generously, and its allies financed several attack ads against DeSantis.

For much of the campaign, DeSantis trailed Putnam. But, in 2017, he started appearing regularly on Fox News, railing against the investigation of Russia’s role in helping Trump get elected. On Laura Ingraham’s show, he said that the special counsel Robert Mueller’s efforts had criminalized ordinary political behavior. “This is actually taking a bias and basically saying you’re gonna use the machinery of government to prevent the American people from making a choice,” he said. (Mueller’s team indicted or took guilty pleas from thirty-seven people and revealed more than a hundred contacts between Trump’s campaign and agents of the Russian state.)

Trump saw DeSantis on television and found him appealing: a combative conservative and a former athlete. “The President loves athletes,” the former DeSantis associate, who is also close to Trump, explained. Soon afterward, Trump endorsed him on Twitter and then appeared with him at a rally in Tampa. DeSantis shot upward in the polls, and beat Putnam in the primary.

DeSantis began mimicking Trump’s characteristic gestures in campaign appearances and paying tribute to him in television ads. In one, DeSantis reads to his son, Mason (“ ‘Then Mr. Trump said, “You’re fired!” ’—I love that part.”) and plays blocks with his young daughter, Madison, exhorting her to “build the wall!” The ad was tongue in cheek, but it succeeded in linking DeSantis with the President. “It was the dumbest, most effective ad in Florida history,” Kevin Cate, a media consultant for DeSantis’s opponent, said.

DeSantis had an advantage in the general election: his opponent, Andrew Gillum, the mayor of Tallahassee and the first Black candidate for governor, was running as a progressive in a not particularly progressive state. Gillum was also dogged by an F.B.I. investigation into whether he had accepted gifts from lobbyists. Still, DeSantis began the campaign with a disastrous gaffe, saying on television, “The last thing we need to do is to monkey this up” by electing Gillum. DeSantis insisted that there was no racial motive behind the statement—“He uses a lot of dorky phrases like that,” one of his former colleagues told me—and the outrage didn’t endure. But his tone deafness created a disadvantage. “We were handling Gillum with kid gloves,” the lawyer close to DeSantis told me. “We can’t hit the guy, because we’re trying to defend the fact that we’re not racist.” DeSantis won by about thirty thousand votes, less than half a per cent of the ballots cast.

In a recent phone interview, Trump took credit for DeSantis’s victory, saying, “If I didn’t endorse him, he wouldn’t have won.” The campaign was managed by Susie Wiles, a veteran political strategist who had helped Trump win the Presidency in 2016. But, after the election, DeSantis abruptly broke off his relationship with Wiles. A longtime Tallahassee lobbyist told me that DeSantis became angry that her lobbying firm—Ballard Partners, one of the most powerful in the state—was taking over the process of appointing officials. “There was a confrontation in a meeting, and it all fell apart,” he said. DeSantis told the firm that its clients would not be welcome in his office as long as they retained Wiles. (Brian Ballard, a founding partner, denied this as “totally false.”) Wiles left, and Trump hired her to run his 2020 campaign in Florida. Trump told me that DeSantis complained about the move, but that he replied, “If you have a manager who wins the World Series, you keep the manager.”

In office, DeSantis took steps that suggested he intended to govern closer to the center. He buoyed environmentalists by forcing out the nine-member board of the South Florida Water Management District, political appointees who were considered hostile to environmental interests. He named a commission to tackle algae blooms, which befouled rivers and lakes in the southern part of the state. And he appointed several Black jurists. At his inauguration, DeSantis asked the Reverend R. B. Holmes, the pastor of a predominantly Black church in Tallahassee, to lead the prayer. “I was encouraged,” Holmes told me.

For decades, the Democratic Party had commanded a majority of Florida’s registered voters. But the state was changing, as Trump’s election helped energize a shift in political affinities. The Republican Party’s rank and file became increasingly radical, and G.O.P. leaders appeared only too happy to follow them. “There was always an element of the Republican Party that was batshit crazy,” Mac Stipanovich, the chief of staff to Governor Bob Martinez, a moderate Republican, told me. “They had lots of different names—they were John Birchers, they were ‘movement conservatives,’ they were the religious right. And we did what every other Republican candidate did: we exploited them. We got them to the polls. We talked about abortion. We promised—and we did nothing. They could grumble, but their choices were limited.

“So what happened?” Stipanovich continued. “Trump opened Pandora’s box and let them out. And all the nasty stuff that was in the underbelly of American politics got a voice. What was thirty-five per cent of the Republican Party is now eighty-five per cent. And it’s too late to turn back.”

In April, 2020, during the early days of the pandemic, DeSantis travelled to the convention center in Miami Beach to appear with Dan Gelber, the city’s mayor, to discuss the state’s response. Gelber, a Democrat, is a former minority leader in the Florida House who teamed up to pass legislation with such Republican leaders as Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio; he told me that he is still friendly with both. “I don’t agree with Jeb on a lot of things, but I have a deep and abiding respect for him,” he said.

Appearing with Gelber, DeSantis outlined the steps that his administration had taken. He had ordered a statewide lockdown. He’d ordered nursing homes sealed off and told the elderly to quarantine; at the time, many states, including New York, were still sending virus patients into nursing homes, which ended in thousands of deaths. Florida had established the first of hundreds of testing centers and set up a Web site that detailed the virus’s trajectory. Most notably, it had ordered millions of masks for health-care workers; DeSantis said that he was fighting to get more. “Having a mask on, I think, would be something that could potentially ward off infections for the most vulnerable,” he said. At numerous public appearances, the Governor wore a mask himself.

DeSantis regarded these efforts as a kind of baseline. “If some folks want to do things more, then they can do more in certain situations,” he said. “We want to work with the local folks.” Under Gelber’s leadership, Miami Beach, a destination for visitors from abroad, had imposed a mask mandate and aggressively ticketed violators. Gelber told me that he urged DeSantis to establish a robust program of contact-tracing. “The Governor was supportive of everything we were doing,” he said.

But DeSantis soon seemed to lose faith in the scientific establishment. Early in the pandemic, Scott Rivkees, the state surgeon general, convened a conference call of many of Florida’s leading public-health experts; at the end of the meeting, he announced that it would be the last. Among those boxed out was Glenn Morris, an epidemiologist whom the University of Florida had recruited in 2007 to set up a center that would help guide the state though the next pandemic. “We spent years preparing for this moment,” Morris told me.

The Governor’s aides say that he was intent on his own research, poring over scientific data and medical journals. He also began to consult a small circle of experts from out of state, who saw the virus as essentially uncontrollable. In April, 2020, he began lifting the statewide lockdown—in keeping, he said, with guidelines set forth by Trump’s White House. The former political adviser with knowledge of the COVID response told me that DeSantis sympathized with the state’s working class, who weren’t able to work remotely and typically didn’t have much in savings. “The people who were criticizing the Governor for keeping everything open tended to be people who had the luxury of working at home,” he said.

Florida quickly posted some of the country’s highest totals of virus cases. In Miami-Dade County, according to records provided by a local official, the number of hospitalizations for COVID rose from about six hundred in an average week to more than two thousand. DeSantis carried on; in July, his education commissioner ordered schools to fully reopen. “Fear does not help us combat the virus,” DeSantis said. At times, though, he seemed to be discouraging a clear picture of COVID’s progress. Florida’s contact-tracing program was anemic; that July, Gelber noted, it reached only eighteen per cent of infected people in Miami-Dade, the state’s most populous county. DeSantis’s aides began ignoring Gelber’s requests for city-by-city mortality data.

With cases skyrocketing, the Miami-Dade County Commission imposed a rule requiring masks in any public place. Daily cases declined sharply, in some places to lockdown levels. “The numbers speak for themselves,” Gelber said. Across the state, at least nineteen counties followed suit.

Similar mandates were taking effect around the country, but Bhattacharya, the Stanford epidemiologist who advised DeSantis, argued that there was little evidence to support them. COVID-19 is transmitted not by droplets—as many contagious diseases are—but by mist, he pointed out. In an analysis of sixty-seven randomized trials, the Cochrane Library, a medical database, found that masks did not significantly slow the spread of influenza, which is transmitted similarly to COVID-19. “Masks are good at stopping droplets, but not aerosols,” Bhattacharya told me.

Bhattacharya’s views are not widely shared; many scientists I spoke to said that, although real-world data is scarce, research shows that properly worn masks can slow the spread of the coronavirus. The problem, they said, was that what people do in scientific experiments—wear tightly fitting N95 masks—is not what they do in day-to-day life. They wear inferior masks, often incorrectly, and sometimes ignore the mask requirement altogether. “There isn’t really a debate on whether masks work—we know that masks work,” Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist at Brown University, told me. “It’s theory versus practice. If you go into a crowded bar and take your mask off to drink, a mask requirement is not going to work very well.”

For DeSantis, the mandates were a futile, unacceptable intrusion on individual liberties. In September, 2020, as he lifted nearly all remaining government-imposed coronavirus restrictions, he issued an executive order prohibiting local governments from enforcing mask mandates. Gelber responded with a letter, arguing that the order invited needless suffering. “This is a frightening view, especially in a state where the major industry is hospitality and tourism,” he said. “It is not merely going to cause additional community spread and sickness but also hamper our efforts to reopen.”

That month, Florida recorded nearly a hundred thousand new cases. Patients overwhelmed hospitals, swamping emergency rooms. “It’s a free-for-all here,” Dr. Bernard Ashby, a cardiologist and internist who works at Lawnwood Hospital, in Fort Pierce, told me at the time. “We don’t have any beds. The nurses are exhausted.” Ashby said that, early in the pandemic, DeSantis had failed to alleviate the crisis by helping make such treatments as monoclonal antibodies available. “He is either completely ignorant of the science, or he’s doing what I suspect, playing politics.”

Dr. Aileen Marty, a professor of infectious disease at Florida International University who advised the mayors of several cities, believes that DeSantis was making a conscious choice. “I think the Governor in his heart of hearts is spreading the virus as a way to herd immunity,” she said. “He’s under the mistaken impression that once you get the disease you’re through with it.” Seeking herd immunity through natural infection, many scientists say, places a huge proportion of the population at risk of serious illness or death—not just the elderly but also cancer patients and others with compromised immune systems, as well as diabetics and the obese. “It’s forty per cent of the population,” Marty said.

DeSantis came under furious criticism, accused of putting the forthcoming Presidential election ahead of his citizens’ health. “We believe they want schools to open to falsely portray a nation—and the largest swing state—as moving past the virus,” an editorial in the *Sun-Sentinel*, a South Florida newspaper, said. DeSantis assured confidants that he was unmoved by the outrage. The lawyer close to DeSantis told me that he said, “I’m not worried about what the news cycle is saying about me. It’s my responsibility to make decisions, and I’ll deal with the criticism.” But his administration became increasingly intent on controlling its message. At a press conference that April, Surgeon General Rivkees said that people should consider social distancing—for “probably a year, if not longer.” After Rivkees sat down, DeSantis’s communications director approached and escorted him from the room. Rivkees largely vanished from public view. Last September, he left the administration and joined Brown University.

In appearances, DeSantis adopted a strident tone, dismissing those who questioned him. During a press conference in January, 2021, Rosa Flores, of CNN, raised her hand to ask a question. Vaccines were becoming available, but the distribution was haphazard; reports had spread of elderly people, some of them in wheelchairs and makeshift beds, waiting all night to get inoculated. “Governor, what has gone wrong with the rollout of the vaccine?” Flores asked. “We’ve seen phone lines jammed, Web sites crashing—”

DeSantis interrupted: “There’s a lot of demand.” As Flores tried to complete her thought, DeSantis jabbed a finger and added, “You just said, ‘What has gone wrong?,’ so I’m answering the question.” Talking over her, he went on, “You’re going to ask how many questions? You get three?” He pointed to other reporters. “They only got one question. Why do you get three?”

When Flores finally finished her question, it was a reasonable one: Why had people been kept waiting for vaccines? DeSantis gave an answer, which was not unreasonable, either: Many hospitals had adopted a first-come-first-served policy. But by then DeSantis had evidently decided that much of the media was not worth trying to convince. His real constituency was elsewhere.

Around the time of the press conference, Meredith Beatrice, a communications aide to DeSantis, sent an e-mail to Bridget Gleason, a producer for “Fox and Friends,” the network’s premier morning show. Beatrice was offering an “exclusive” story: Florida was about to vaccinate its millionth senior citizen. “Look forward to working with you and the team bright and early tomorrow!” she wrote.

The “Fox and Friends” segment, which aired on January 22nd, was more than seven minutes long, and as sunny as a campaign ad. DeSantis appeared with Henry Sayler, a hundred-year-old Second World War veteran who was to receive the milestone vaccine, and boasted about how swiftly his state was vaccinating seniors. The host Pete Hegseth said, “What are you doing differently that’s allowing you to vaccinate so many more of the vulnerable population?” DeSantis replied, “We are working with pharmacies, we are working with hospitals. And if you doubled my vaccine allotment next week, I would be able to do double the vaccines.” As he spoke, a chart appeared, detailing Florida’s nationwide lead in vaccinations; it had been supplied by his office.

Afterward, Gleason, the Fox producer, made it clear to DeSantis’s aides that the network would welcome him back anytime. “I honestly think he could host the show, with the chops we saw from him at the vaccine site with the 100-year-old veteran!” she wrote.

With Trump exiting the White House, Fox needed a dominating personality to animate its news and talk shows. DeSantis’s forceful presence and growing popularity seemed likely to yield high ratings. In the following months, e-mail traffic between Fox producers and DeSantis’s office, produced in response to a public-records request, revealed an unusually collaborative exchange. DeSantis’s aides could not only pitch stories, they could also shape the discussion. “We are flexible on topic,” the producer Beth Sullivan wrote to Meredith Beatrice. (Fox denied any favoritism, saying, “Like all news organizations, we conduct pre-interviews with guests to ensure preparedness.”) Before one appearance, Beatrice wrote to Fox, “Feel free to carry this announcement live on your feeds.”

The e-mails suggest that the Fox News producers were intent on making DeSantis a national figure. Most of the stories focussed on amplifying his unorthodox approach to the coronavirus, but some traded on his nascent celebrity; one featured his three-year-old son’s golf game. “We see him as the future of the party,” a booker named Karrah Kaplan wrote to Beatrice. The producers all but begged him to appear on their shows. Once, when he demurred, Kaplan protested, “He made time for Tucker last night!”

In the year after the Presidential election, Fox News producers asked DeSantis to appear at least a hundred and ten times, and he agreed at least thirty-four times. They posted some three hundred and forty stories about him online. The coverage drew attention from across the country. This March, DeSantis’s campaign and his political-action committee, Friends of Ron DeSantis, reported raising a hundred and ten million dollars. Nearly forty per cent of it came from out-of-state contributors, including the billionaires Peter Thiel and Ken Griffin.

The more DeSantis appeared on Fox and similarly strident platforms, the more polarizing his rhetoric became. He refused to say that President Biden had been legitimately elected; he referred instead to the Biden “regime” and adopted the language of the President’s cruder detractors. “If you look at what we’ve done to fight back against Brandon so far, you know, we succeeded,” he told the Fox News Radio host Guy Benson in March. “The contrast between a doddering, quasi-senile President who has to have his press team clean up his remarks after every time he opens his mouth, versus somebody like me who’s out there—I am very direct, I say what I mean, I mean what I say, I lead, and I get things done.”

Last January, a Jewish student was beaten up at a neo-Nazi rally outside Orlando; the next day, a group of men on a nearby overpass waved a swastika flag and placards with anti-Semitic slogans. Officials from around the state issued condemnations. DeSantis’s response came from his press secretary, Christina Pushaw, who suggested that the incidents might have been faked. “Do we even know they’re Nazis?” she mused on Twitter.

After days of criticism from Democrats, DeSantis arrived at a press conference near Palm Beach; he was there to talk about the Everglades, but he took the opportunity to counterattack. “I’m not going to have people try to smear me that belong to a political party that has elevated anti-Semites to the halls of Congress, like Ilhan Omar,” he said.

For DeSantis, the moment exemplified a theatrical governing style, which involved subverting a venerable American political ritual: an elected official says something offensive, or fails to condemn something offensive, which triggers waves of performative indignation in the press—until the politician offers an apology. DeSantis instead turned moments like the one with the Nazis to his advantage; the more he defied tradition, the more it thrilled his supporters. On Twitter, one of them suggested, implausibly, that DeSantis’s critics were as bad as the anti-Semites on the bridge: “How about all cnts calling people racist, and essentially nazis for disagreeing with them? Desantis is probably the next president. Deal with it.”

As DeSantis prepared to run for reëlection, he introduced a series of legislative measures that seemed calculated to spark similar fights, and to inspire fevered discussion outside of Florida. Many rested on flimsy legal grounds. One bill banned “sanctuary cities,” in which local governments refuse to coöperate with federal officials to deport undocumented immigrants; Florida has no such cities. Another bill created a police force dedicated to preventing election fraud; almost no fraud has been proved in recent Florida elections. DeSantis also dispatched a battalion of state law-enforcement officers to Texas to help stop illegal immigration, even though the nearest portion of the Mexican border is nearly nine hundred miles away. (As DeSantis saw off the troops, Fox covered the moment live.)

Some of these actions appeared brazenly partisan. In 2020, following a summer of protests over the killing of George Floyd, DeSantis proposed an “anti-rioting” law that would make it a crime to block traffic during even a peaceful protest. “When they start to do that, there needs to be swift penalties,” he said. (In Florida, the George Floyd protests had been almost entirely peaceful.) The Republican-controlled legislature passed the bill, but that September a federal judge declared it unconstitutional, saying that its definition of “riot” was so vague as to be open to partisan enforcement.

If DeSantis’s legislative strategy was polarizing, that seemed to be the point. When attacked, he gave no quarter; he went after reporters aggressively, sometimes inaccurately, often in person. Unlike Trump, he spoke in clear, complete sentences, which made him harder to dismiss. His principal partner was his press secretary, Christina Pushaw. From early morning until late at night, seven days a week, Pushaw took to Twitter to trash anyone who presented the slightest critique of her boss. In February, immigration activists likened people trying to cross the Mexican border to the Cubans who fled Castro’s dictatorship in the nineteen-sixties. DeSantis declared the comparison “disgusting”—a sop to Miami’s influential Cuban community. When Thomas Wenski, the Catholic Archbishop of Miami, argued that “no child should be deemed disgusting, especially by a public servant,” Pushaw responded by posting a photo of Wenski over the caption “Lying is a sin.”

Pushaw, thirty-one, previously worked at Stand Together, a nonprofit organization backed by the Koch brothers, and spent time in the former Soviet Union, where she claimed to have witnessed the failures of socialism. Pushaw says that her job is “debunking false narratives,” which often entails describing DeSantis’s opponents as pedophiles or socialists, and urging supporters to “drag them.” Her ferocity inspires cautious admiration. “She is the most powerful woman in Florida,” a consultant to several Republican candidates told me. “Ron loves her, because she says things that even he won’t say.”

Disdaining the “corporate media,” DeSantis and Pushaw often bristled under questioning. In March, 2021, when the *Herald* reported that some of the first vaccines in the state had gone to residents of wealthy enclaves where DeSantis donors lived, the Governor denounced the story as “a really, really poorly executed hit piece.”

It helped DeSantis that sometimes he was right. In April, 2021, “60 Minutes” reported that he had given the Publix supermarket chain a no-bid contract to distribute the COVID vaccine, after it contributed a hundred thousand dollars to his political-action committee. The segment featured video of a press conference, at which the show’s reporter Sharyn Alfonsi suggested that DeSantis had engaged in “pay to play.” Viewers saw DeSantis tearing into Alfonsi: “It’s wrong, it’s a fake narrative. I just disabused you of the narrative, and you don’t care about the facts.” But the unedited video, which later circulated online, showed DeSantis providing an explanation: in consultation with local officials, vaccine contracts had also been offered to several other retail and pharmaceutical chains.

The unstated premise of DeSantis’s approach was that there was little point in trying to attract Democratic or even moderate voters; if he got his loyalists outraged enough, they would come to the polls in sufficient numbers for him to win. Stuart Stevens, an adviser to Mitt Romney’s Presidential campaign in 2012, told me that Republican leaders have made a calculated choice in recent decades. As their reliable cadre of white voters shrank, they realized that they could either try to attract more minorities or try to motivate white citizens who rarely voted by tapping their racial insecurities. When Romney ran, he rejected the latter strategy, Stevens told me. Then came Trump, who embraced it and won. “The G.O.P. has become a white-grievance party,” Stevens said.

DeSantis, he believes, is following the Trump playbook. “To me, Ron DeSantis is a fairly run-of-the-mill politician who will do anything to get elected,” he said. “The problem is what the Party has become. It’s a race to the bottom.”

This past May, DeSantis scheduled a ceremony to sign a bill that, in the name of ballot security, would restrict access to the polls. “Fox and Friends” was granted exclusive access; all other outlets, including the *Herald* and the Tampa Bay *Times*, were excluded. Fox ran the ceremony live for seven and a half minutes.

In March, U.S. District Judge Mark Walker nullified large parts of the law, calling it a “cynical effort” to suppress turnout among Black voters. DeSantis dismissed the decision as “performative partisanship.” Legal experts say that DeSantis will likely prevail in federal appellate courts, which in recent years have given legislatures broad authority to rewrite voting rules.

The law was consistent with an array of Republican-led efforts to make voting more difficult, which typically discourage likely Democratic voters more than Republican ones. DeSantis and his allies in the legislature have launched a series of other initiatives to control the conduct of elections. In addition to creating the Office of Election Crimes and Security, they sharply curbed voting by mail and the use of third parties to register to vote and to cast ballots.

Earlier this year, DeSantis broke with tradition to take control of legislative redistricting. For decades, after each new census, the Florida legislature has redrawn voting districts. The process usually involved a protracted political struggle, but when the legislature—Republican or Democratic—presented its plan to the governor, it was typically approved.

In March, DeSantis rejected the new map and proposed his own. The legislature’s plan had created a new district that seemed likely to be won by a Republican, but DeSantis felt that it was not ambitious enough. His redrawn map eliminated two of four congressional seats held by African Americans and created four districts that seemed likely to turn white and Republican. DeSantis justified the changes by saying that he was eliminating illegal “racial gerrymandering.”

Black leaders were appalled. One of the congressmen whose districts were nullified was Al Lawson, who was first elected in 2016. He represents the Fifth District, which stretches from the small towns west of Tallahassee all the way to Jacksonville; its population is nearly half Black. “DeSantis is not representing the interests of African American voters in the state of Florida,” he said. “He just doesn’t do that.”

Last July, DeSantis travelled to St. Petersburg and encouraged Floridians to get a COVID vaccine. He’d received one himself, he noted: the single-shot Johnson & Johnson. “These vaccines are saving lives,” he said.

But DeSantis also signed a bill prohibiting businesses from requiring patrons to show proof of vaccination, even in such closed environments as cruise ships. He implied that people who wanted to protect themselves could simply get their own vaccine. If you argued otherwise, he said, “you really are saying you don’t believe in the vaccines, you don’t believe in the data, you don’t believe in the science.”

Within a few months, any enthusiasm he had felt for vaccines seemed to have evaporated. Asked whether he’d received a booster shot, he would say only, “I’m not gonna let that be a weapon for people to be able to use.” DeSantis clearly recognized the political gamesmanship around vaccines. He also clearly recognized which team he was playing for. Glenn Morris, the director of the Emerging Pathogens Institute, at the University of Florida, told me, “He’s questioning the vaccine because he knows who his constituency is.”

In September, DeSantis appointed Dr. Joseph Ladapo the state’s surgeon general. Like DeSantis, Ladapo was an Ivy League apostate; trained at Harvard, he had often been at odds with the medical mainstream. Though he had served for several years on the U.C.L.A. faculty, his supervisor there declined to recommend him, writing, “The people of Florida would be better served by a Surgeon General who grounds his policy decisions and recommendations in the best scientific evidence rather than his opinions.” Ladapo had signed the Great Barrington Declaration and, early in the pandemic, had stood before the Supreme Court building to advocate such alternative COVID treatments as hydroxychloroquine, which has repeatedly been shown to be ineffective.

When Ladapo took the job, he appeared with DeSantis and chided his colleagues in other states who recommended more stringent measures. “We’re done with fear,” he said. “It’s over here. Expiration date. It’s done.” At the time, some fifty thousand Floridians had already died from the virus.

Democratic legislators were pleased to express outrage at Ladapo’s views. In October, before his confirmation hearings, he entered the office of Senator Tina Polsky without a mask. Polsky, who was scheduled to undergo treatment for breast cancer, asked him to put one on. Ladapo instead offered to meet her outside. “He was very condescending,” Polsky told me. Ladapo maintained afterward that the mask inhibited his self-expression: “It is important for me to communicate clearly and effectively with people. I can’t do that when half my face is covered.” (On hearing this, Polsky said, “Don’t doctors wear masks?”)

Ladapo gave vaccines only a lukewarm endorsement, even though they are widely understood to prevent more deaths and hospitalizations than any other tool. “There’s nothing special about them compared to any other preventive measure,” he said. He also said that there was more to learn about their efficacy, adding, “People need to continue to stick with their intuition and their sensibilities.” By 2022, Florida ranked twenty-second in the nation in its percentage of vaccinated adults, making it one of the lowest-ranking large states.

Increasingly, DeSantis argued that Democratic-leaning states were run by oppressive governments eager to strip citizens of their rights. He boasted that Florida had received a stream of new arrivals, many of them fleeing states like California. (This was true, but misleading. In the course of the pandemic, California’s population decreased by roughly three hundred thousand, and Florida’s grew by about the same figure. But Florida had gained citizens at a similar rate nearly every year since the late nineteen-sixties.) “Florida is a free state—we reject the biomedical security state that curtails liberty, ruins livelihoods, and divides society,” DeSantis said earlier this year. “These unprecedented policies have been as ineffective as they have been destructive. They are grounded more in blind adherence to Faucian declarations than they are in the constitutional traditions that are the foundation of free nations.”

But DeSantis’s insistence on preventing mandates sometimes violated the kinds of liberties he championed in his campaign book—former core principles of the Republican Party. Giving people the right to go to work unvaccinated also meant telling companies that they were not free to decide how to manage their employees. And preventing mask mandates meant telling town governments and schools that they were not free to enforce local standards.

After DeSantis issued executive orders to stifle mask mandates, more than a dozen school districts and local governments defied him. An ally of his, a Republican legislator named Anthony Sabatini, filed at least fifteen lawsuits against COVID protocols. DeSantis also called a special session of the legislature to pass measures that made local governments drop their COVID-safety mandates. Not a single Republican voted against them.

The laws meant that schools had to open but were powerless to compel students to wear masks or to get vaccinated. Local officials were mystified and angry. “People were dying all around me, including family members,” Joy Bowen, a school-board member in Leon County, told me. “I looked at this from a personal standpoint: I am taking care of my children, and I am taking care of other people’s children who voted for me to keep their kids safe.”

Glenn Morris, the director of the Emerging Pathogens Institute, lamented the cost of the battle over COVID. “The politicization of the vaccine was entirely unnecessary, and it’s a tragedy,” he told me. As the pandemic began, Morris and his colleagues at the University of Florida in Gainesville maintained close contact with the state Department of Health. Two or three times a week, the department shared new data, and a group of epidemiologists analyzed them, to inform research and to make recommendations to the state. “When you have an outbreak, you have so many questions,” Tom Hladish, one of the scientists, said. “When will it peak? How bad will it be? What is the hospital burden? How many people are dead?”

In June, 2020, the epidemiologists say, the health department terminated the relationship and stopped sharing data. (The department declined requests for comment.) “The only reason you don’t collect data is that you don’t want to know what the data says,” Derek Cummings, an epidemiologist at the University of Florida, said. “The recommendations we were making were consistently at odds with the policy of the state.”

At the university, a dashboard was set up to track the virus’s trajectory through the campus—a sprawling place, with sixty thousand students. After the campus reopened, on DeSantis’s orders, in the fall of 2020, the dashboard became an embarrassment to the Governor. Day after day, the university recorded the highest caseloads of any in the country. Mike Lauzardo, the deputy director of the Emerging Pathogens Institute, who oversaw the dashboard, was ordered to destroy coronavirus data by health-department officials, who accused him of improperly sharing information. An investigation by the university found no evidence of misconduct, and the data remained intact. Still, one of his colleagues told me, “Lauzardo was feeling incredible pressure.”

On several occasions, the university prohibited professors from testifying as expert witnesses in court cases that were brought against DeSantis’s policies. Daniel Smith, a professor of political science, was one of three professors barred from testifying in a lawsuit against legislation that curtailed access to polls. Another professor, Dr. Jeffrey Goldhagen, was barred from testifying in defense of local governments that imposed mask mandates. The faculty senate found that professors were also discouraged from teaching or even researching controversial subjects like critical race theory. “The policy was, we couldn’t do things on campus that tick off the Governor,” according to one of the faculty members who took part in the investigation.

Kent Fuchs, the university’s president, declined to speak to me. In August, after the faculty senate gave his administration a vote of no confidence for its handling of the COVID-19 response, he announced that he was resigning. Daniel Smith and other professors sued the university and won; a federal judge said, “U.F. has bowed to perceived pressure from Florida’s political leaders and has sanctioned the unconstitutional suppression of ideas out of favor with Florida’s ruling party.”

Much of DeSantis’s influence at the university appears to be exercised through Mori Hosseini, a real-estate developer who serves as the chairman of the board. Hosseini contributed more than a hundred and eighty thousand dollars to DeSantis’s political-action committee and, according to a report in Politico, gave the Governor’s wife a ride on his plane. The board has thirteen members, most of whom were appointed by either DeSantis or his predecessor, Rick Scott. Together, ten of them gave nearly a million dollars to DeSantis’s PAC. “Members of the board of trustees have told me that serving the Governor is their No. 1 task,” Paul Ortiz, a history professor who leads the faculty union, told me.

Perhaps the most telling evidence of DeSantis’s influence is that Joseph Ladapo, the surgeon general, was hired to teach at the medical school. An investigation found that Ladapo was made a tenured professor without a full tenure evaluation or a search for other qualified candidates—all in violation of university rules. (The university denies this, saying that Ladapo completed a standard application process. Ladapo didn’t respond to a request for comment.) The professorship, along with the position of surgeon general, gave Ladapo a combined salary of four hundred and thirty-seven thousand dollars. The process was initiated by Hosseini, according to an e-mail he sent to the head of the university’s medical network, which was obtained in a public-records request. “There is only one reason that Ladapo was hired as a professor, and that is to support the Governor’s policies,” Goldhagen, the doctor who was barred from testifying, told me.

In January, DeSantis appeared at Florida’s capitol for his annual State of the State address. He spoke for more than thirty minutes, in a celebratory mood. Florida was creating jobs and businesses at a robust pace. The state budget had a fifteen-billion-dollar surplus, despite one of the country’s lowest tax burdens. “Our economy is the envy of the nation,” he told the assembled legislators.

For DeSantis, it was a rare moment of publicity for his policy agenda rather than for his fight with the liberal establishment. “Compared to the culture-war measures, the mainstream stuff he has enacted is almost invisible,” Jon Mills, a former House speaker and a co-director of the University of Florida’s Center of Governmental Responsibility, told me. “But there’s a lot of it.” Many of these measures have enjoyed broad support. DeSantis persuaded the legislature to create one of the country’s first wildlife corridors and steered more than a billion dollars to Everglades restoration (even if much of the money came from Biden’s infrastructure plan). He signed a measure to temporarily suspend the state gasoline tax, and raised salaries for public-school teachers.

The moment of comity with teachers didn’t last, though. In March, DeSantis signed a bill forbidding educators to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity with students before the fourth grade; the law allows parents to sue school districts for violations. DeSantis said he was battling the imposition of “woke gender ideology,” and invoked his most reliable foils—“these leftist politicians, corporate media outlets, some of these activist groups” who “support sexualizing kids in kindergarten.” Pushaw, his press secretary, went further, suggesting on Twitter that opponents of the bill were pedophiles: “You are probably a groomer or at least you don’t denounce the grooming of 4-8 year old children. Silence is complicity.”

But, in his address at the capitol, DeSantis focussed on the fact that Florida’s public schools had stayed open during the pandemic, protecting some 2.7 million students from the educational damage brought on by closings elsewhere. In carrying out his COVID policies, DeSantis said, he had faced down “hysterical media,” public ridicule, and an array of lawsuits. “We have protected the right of our citizens to earn a living, provided our businesses with the ability to prosper, fought back against unconstitutional federal mandates, and insured our kids have the opportunity to thrive,” DeSantis told the legislators. “We were right, and they were wrong.”

It is difficult to say with certainty which policies have worked best during the pandemic. Every responsible official has made trade-offs between keeping citizens employed, keeping them educated, and keeping them healthy. Analysts who sympathize with DeSantis’s libertarian views maintain that the stringent and sometimes coercive measures taken by many of the country’s largest states did not necessarily save many lives. A recent study by researchers at the University of Chicago, the Heritage Foundation, and the Committee to Unleash Prosperity compared states’ death rates, adjusted for age and other risk factors. Florida came in twenty-eighth in the country. California ranked twenty-seventh, and New York forty-seventh. “States that withdrew the most from economic activity did not significantly improve health by doing so,” the study said.

But scientists I spoke to argued that adjusting for risk factors can be misleading; if your population is more vulnerable, they say, you should be more cautious, not less. And state-by-state comparisons are tricky, because populations and circumstances differ so widely. New York, for instance, had an enormous spike of deaths at the beginning of the pandemic, which has not recurred as precautions have become widespread. In Florida, deaths have tended to spike with each new wave of infections. In all, more than seventy-five thousand people died of COVID in Florida, one of the country’s highest totals. Ira Longini, a biostatistician at the University of Florida, argued that as many as half of those lives could have been spared if DeSantis had mandated masks and vaccines. This month, as vaccines were approved for children younger than five, every state in the country rushed to order supplies—except for Florida, where DeSantis resisted until he was overwhelmed by criticism.

The thing that separated DeSantis from other governors was not just policy but tone. Interviewing scientists about COVID-19, it is easy to be struck by their humility before a disease that is still evolving. “There’s just so much we don’t know,” Nuzzo, of Brown University, told me. “We are going to be studying this virus for a long time.”

Humility is not a tone that DeSantis ever struck. The politicization of the virus was perhaps inevitable in a country as polarized as America has become, but it almost certainly inhibited our ability to have an intelligent discussion about it. “It’s a tragedy,” Bhattacharya told me.

But DeSantis’s outrage attracted followers. In 2021, registered Republicans exceeded registered Democrats in Florida for the first time. DeSantis and the Republican Party enjoy near-total command of the state’s political machinery. The Florida Democratic Party is so enfeebled that, in 2020, it applied to the Paycheck Protection Program for a loan, intended to help distressed small businesses survive the pandemic.

In the fall of 2020, when Trump was running for reëlection, he harbored persistent doubts that DeSantis, whom he viewed as his creation, was entirely his ally. DeSantis campaigned for the President, appeared at his rallies in Florida, and occasionally went to Mar-a-Lago. “Ron will tell you he’s doing everything he can for the President, and he’ll sound believable,” a lawyer who speaks regularly to both men told me at the time. But Trump was not convinced.

In the early days of the pandemic, Trump and DeSantis had been happy to lean on each other. When DeSantis joined a press event in the Oval Office and explained his COVID policies, Trump held up a chart that the Governor had brought along—an uncharacteristic supporting role.

After Trump lost the Presidential election, he grew concerned that DeSantis no longer needed him. The following spring, Trump scheduled a rally in Sarasota—one of his first since losing—and invited DeSantis to join him onstage. People who know both men told me that DeSantis didn’t decline, but he didn’t confirm, either. “There were alarm bells ringing—will DeSantis appear?” a former Republican congressman told me. “Ron didn’t want to be onstage with Trump.” At the last minute, a condominium tower in Surfside collapsed, and nearly a hundred people were killed. DeSantis rushed to the scene and missed Trump’s speech. “I’ve never seen anyone use Trump for his own purposes, but Ron used Trump,” the former congressman said.

Trump told me repeatedly that he and DeSantis had a “very good relationship,” adding, “I’m proud of Ron.” But others say that, as DeSantis’s popularity grew, tension hardened into resentment. “He won’t kiss the ring,” the political leader who sees DeSantis often told me. After the 2020 election, Trump made Mar-a-Lago his permanent home, but DeSantis rarely showed his face there. He looked busier than Trump, too: as a sitting governor, DeSantis could call a press conference or propose a new initiative anytime, whereas Trump was reduced to appearing on One America News and sending out e-mails.

The thing that grated most was that, as Trump considered running in 2024, DeSantis did not rule out a campaign of his own. The more plausible DeSantis has become as a nominee, the more people have speculated that he might decide to take on Trump.

Trump told me that he was “very close to making a decision” about whether to run. “I don’t know if Ron is running, and I don’t ask him,” he said. “It’s his prerogative. I think I would win.” In nearly every poll of likely Republican contenders, Trump still has a solid advantage: DeSantis’s constituency was Trump’s first. Trump seems to want to keep it that way. A consultant who has worked for several Republican candidates said that the former President had talked with confidants about ways to stop DeSantis: “Trump World is working overtime to find ways to burn DeSantis down. They really hate him.”

But Trump may have good reasons to sit out the election. “He can do everything now that he could do when he was President, except shoot off missiles,” the consultant who knows both him and DeSantis said. “He’s making a lot of money. That’s the most important thing to him.” Without Trump in the primaries, DeSantis would likely have an immediate lead. A nationwide survey, conducted by the pollster Tony Fabrizio, suggests that thirty-nine per cent of Republican voters would support him; his nearest challenger is Mike Pence, with fifteen per cent. Whatever discussions DeSantis is having about the subject are private, in part because the uncertainty is good for him. “The moment he shows up in Iowa, the suspense is over,” the consultant to Republican candidates told me. In the meantime, all of the consultant’s colleagues are lining up to work for DeSantis: “Everyone is trying to get a piece of him.”

DeSantis has remade the political landscape in Florida. It seems conceivable that he could attempt something similar on a national level—though some political observers wonder whether he could endure the countless hours of banal conversation required to succeed in a national election. “He’s going to have to go sit in a diner and listen to the local county chairman jerk off for twenty minutes,” a Republican consultant told me. “I don’t know if he can do that.”

It is possible that the only thing that will complicate DeSantis’s ascent is his own impatience. At forty-three, he can afford to wait. But there is every indication that he doesn’t want to. “Ron has been told for four years that he’s Trump’s successor—that all the women want to sleep with him, and all the men want to be him,” the consultant told me. “Ron has heard way too many times, ‘You’re next.’ ” ♦

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